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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 000498

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SUBJECT: SRI LANKA REQUESTS CO-CHAIR STATEMENTS CONDEMNING
LTTE AERIAL BOMBING

REF: COLOMBO 491

Classified By: Ambassador Robert O. Blake, Jr. for reasons
1.4 (b) and (d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Bogollagama convoked Co-Chair Ambassadors on March 27 to brief them on the March 26 LTTE air attack on the military airbase adjacent to Colombo's international airport (ref), and to request that Co-Chair countries issue a statement condemning the attack. Foreign Secretary Kohona read from a letter sent to Co-Chair and Perm 5 countries as well as India on March 4, 2005 which expressed concern about reports that the LTTE had acquired two Czech Zlin 143 aircraft and had built a runway in the area around Iranamadu in northern Sri Lanka. He said the March 26 attack marked the first time that the LTTE had used its aircraft in an offensive attack. He also remarked that the two aircraft flew 118 miles from an airfield north of Mannar and back without refueling. He noted that with this capability the LTTE poses a threat to international shipping as well as to nuclear facilities in southern India. When pressed whether this meant that this new capability also posed a threat to tourists, Bogollogama said there was no such threat and that the risks to shipping were only potential. COMMENT: Ambassador will look for an early public diplomacy opportunity to note the USG's serious concern about the LTTE's aerial attack and to urge both sides to refrain from military action and pursue a negotiated settlement to the conflict. End Summary.

First Use of Offensive Air Capability

2, (C) At Bogollagama's request, Foreign Secretary Kohona briefed the Co-Chairs that Sri Lanka had been aware of the LTTE air capability for several years. He summarized a letter that had been sent on March 4, 2005 to Secretary Rice, Jack Straw, and the Foreign Ministers of India and other

Permanent Five and Co-Chair countries. The letter expressed concern about reports that the LTTE had acquired two Czech Zlin 143 aircraft and had built a runway in the area around Iranamadu in northern Sri Lanka. The letter reported that Sri Lanka's Ministry of Defense had confirmed these capabilities using unmanned aerial vehicles. Kohona said this marked the first time that a terrorist group had acquired an offensive air capability. Kohona noted that the letters to Secretary Rice and other Foreign Ministers had requested each government to (a) express its deep concern about the acquisition by the LTTE of these capabilities, (b) caution the LTTE against using them in a hostile way, and (c) demand that the newly acquired offensive air capabilities be dismantled in a verifiable way. (NOTE: Kohona did not say whether any government had responded favorably to these requests.)

¶3. (C) Kohona explained that the attack by two LTTE aircraft on March 26 marked the first time that the LTTE had used its aircraft in an offensive attack, in what was a clear violation of the Ceasefire Agreement. He told the ambassadors that the two aircraft flew 118 miles without refueling. He noted that with this capability the LTTE poses a threat to international shipping as well as to nuclear facilities in southern India. Bogollagama concluded by asking for Co-Chair statements condemning the LTTE attack.

Three Aircraft Operational

¶4. (C) Ambassador thanked Bogollagama for the briefing and asked how many aircraft the GSL assessed the LTTE might have

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and how they acquired them. Bogollagama responded that the government believes the LTTE has three operational aircraft. Kohona indicated that the LTTE most likely had imported them after the CFA went into effect in 2002 when a large number of containers for the LTTE passed through Colombo Port without inspection. He added that many containers also had not been inspected in the aftermath of the tsunami when large consignments of humanitarian goods went to the north.

Operation From North of Mannar

¶5. (C) Norwegian Ambassador Brattskar asked where the aircraft had flown from. Kohona responded that the aircraft had flown from a runway "somewhere north" of Mannar (on the northwest coast). Kohona indicated that the Sri Lankan military had bombed the runway which had been camouflaged with trees that burned in a way that suggested they were not real trees but made of synthetic material.

¶6. (C) German Ambassador Weerth, referring back to Kohona's allusion to the Ceasefire Agreement, asked whether the government considered that the Ceasefire Agreement remained operative (since GSL aircraft had repeatedly violated the CFA). Kohona remarked that the question was not relevant. The Minister hastily stepped in to clarify that the government had never said the agreement was not valid.

LTTE Not a Threat to Tourists

¶7. (C) Ambassador noted that all the Co-Chair countries were being asked to make a judgment about whether the latest attacks constitute a threat to their citizens living in government controlled areas and to tourists visiting the south. He further noted that the government had reassured several European countries, from which many tourists visit Sri Lanka, that the latest LTTE attack posed no risk to tourists. At the same time Foreign Minister had just told the Co-Chairs that this new LTTE capability posed a threat to international shipping and to nuclear installations in India. The Ambassador said that the US Government's advice thus far

to American tourists and American citizens was that the LTTE is targeting only Sri Lankan military and official targets, but has refrained from targeting Americans. Ambassador asked whether this was the correct advice. The Minister paused, aware that there was an inconsistency in what he was saying, and clarified there was no threat to foreign tourists and that the risk to shipping was only a potential threat. The Ambassador further noted that he had received questions about whether the government had taken the necessary measures to prevent the LTTE from staging a similar attack in the future, since the US Embassy is located very close to the President's office at Temple Trees. The Foreign Minister responded that he would be receiving a military briefing on this subject on March 29 and would share the results of that briefing with the Ambassadors. He concluded by again noting that the acquisition and use of offensive air capabilities by the LTTE could not be permitted. He urged Co-Chair countries to make a statement along those lines.

¶6. COMMENT: Post understands that Washington is not in the habit of making statements along the lines of what Bogollagama requested. Ambassador will look for an early public diplomacy opportunity to note the USG's serious concern about the LTTE's aerial attack and to urge both sides to refrain from military action and pursue a negotiated settlement to the conflict.

BLAKE